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Now the great work begins  
he writes, or is he dying?  
Did he write with self  
deluded vanity? Or irony?  
Or simple accuracy?

Now the great work begins  
and this “beginning”  
is a machine (a “gin”)  
for meaning or gains  
all voices into itself.  
Every great work , he said,  
has the shape of a single word.

A word is spoken.  
From silence  
its attack,  
then the segments of its sound  
and all the formant zones  
its sonants press from  
to be heard by you,

envelope (urn)  
of the shape.  
And then the closure, stop or *Wiederhall*  
or clouds pass before my eyes  
reflected in the glass tabletop,  
clouds fast and the word is spoken.

Now the great work begins.  
Put iron ink in the pen.  
Lean on the wedge-stick,  
cuneiformers, the fine  
smooth clay is ready for your lust.  
The seagull laughs.

Now the great work begins,  
parrots in the coffee tree.  
Walk in wet sand.  
Sun pardon us one week,

bright spell be broken,  
too much light to see.

Now the great work  
is beginning, the hard listening  
holds (how?) somebody's hand.  
Road rivers, the harbor  
thronged all weekend with masts  
meek now. The character  
of the clouds has changed  
while I've been writing this letter.  
Formally ragged cumulus  
sailed fast from the west.  
Now a wispiest colony succeeds,  
torn apart by some war in heaven  
limps by our heads. That book  
I sent you, did you read it,  
really read it, to the end?

What could I have been thinking  
sending you a book with no words,  
no pages, just a quick elapsing  
of cloud vapor in plain unflavored sky,  
a text of mere lovely absences?

Have you ever done anything really wrong?  
I began and began  
and seldom finished,  
yet even so finished  
more than was needed.  
I fled from sunshine  
and normal weathers.  
Rainwalla, I chose aloof.  
But wrong every day.  
In the Java Bean Coffee House  
on the harbor in New Bedford  
men without shame discuss poetry.  
I wonder at the fate of language  
to be spoken in a world of things.

Having neglected to invest in mutual funds  
I never read Thackeray, I like  
rivers better than lakes and ocean better than both  
— a house is a breath between departures —  
serendipity of male gender  
all that self and baggage. Lazy,  
I was lazy.

But now the great work begins,  
released by ocean weather (les temps de la mer)  
(a word drawn into feminine from Latin neuter  
by consonance with the word for mother,  
may we all be so drawn, lifted  
towards the conscience so, a flower  
in the Buddha's hand, raised,  
smiled with, offered  
to some inconceivable all-pervasive  
beyondness close inside,  
offered to the wind.

A smile is the sky in your face,  
He lifts the flower — what color, kind,  
do you imagine it was, flower?  
What color is the mind?  
Let it be so — the great work  
stirs in me as once  
down Blake's arm old Milton trundled,  
made young again by going down,  
into the speakable condition of the listening other,  
and spoke, I feel it stirring,  
deer-shy in suburban woods,  
touch-me-not and I will come to you  
and by calling give you comfort,  
such comfort as a man dare have  
on a blue planet, a house like this,  
life quick and ruin hardy,  
worry till I come. The work  
begins my life was listening for  
nervous at the door of the Exact,

the pedantic fit

which is the jewel's  
glory in its setting,

that the stone fit  
the gold and gold  
take its shape  
from what it holds  
displaying it  
in the peace of form,

the marriage.

Now the word begins my sleep was hearing.

The clouds have slowed their paces now  
and a great bird flies overhead  
or is it a gull so close it darks the sun,  
a bird like a nun praying on the busy street,  
a bell ringing, a flag flapping,  
a bird like a bird?

For there is wind. The great work  
needs it, distended Dizzie Gillespie cheeks  
of the puffers by their alchemic fires  
ever huffing, between hard squeezes at the bellows,

o my love we live in the valve of the world,  
it all is breathing

and when we're decent  
comes breathing through us

and through us the wind is wielded  
that cooks the everlasting broth,

the silver soup of the alchemists  
with globes of fatty gold in it,

uneasy to look at, thou must become.  
I also am the gleet of gold,

inspect me as it has been said before,  
aye, the great work has always

been spoken or written before,  
inscribed in the nature of the place

we wake to find.  
We wake to find.

It is written and it must be read  
by writing down the wind until it falls,

and then you find it,  
crack your cheeks and blow,

the wind is faithful in its fashion,  
the treasures that wait in earth

for us to answer them  
with melodious pronunciations of a hidden text.

Now the island Pig Roast day  
is Saturday this year, on August 12th,  
old Lammas, when the blue  
faced Severn shepherds slew their sheep  
and set the head of each pointing out  
(northeast, northwest and south) to guard the world  
with the bale of their dead eyes. No,  
it is not true, it is not Lamb-Mass,  
not so, the Mass of Lugh maybe,  
like Irish Lughnasa, the High God's feast

when Irish warriors plunge naked into kettles  
full of seawater, tepid, submerge and change  
their bodies into seals and dogs and hawks  
go screaming down the beer-hall  
to the far gate, the one they plate with gold  
and only let the sun in, but let  
these changed Men out. No,

that's a lie too, a lie as well, this Mass  
is Loaf's Mass, high holiday of bread,  
holy heathen wheat. And from the spill  
of flour round the table we infer the names  
of those who come to love us this long year  
and the footprints of those who plan to die.

No, no, no/ shut up and eat your bread.  
For from the soft sensuous half-drunken  
tender crumb of it, easy as a first date,  
you taste: the likelihood of love on a fell star.

Tropismes. Holy tropes of Saint Eulaly, why I  
never thought the chanting would be done  
and now I hope it never ends: for this

is reason and upon me prov'n, that every bit so long  
as the song lasts the world lasts with it  
and my beautiful wife, wearing a sweater tonight

in the northeast wind, walks with me up the hill  
into a blaze of pink broad-rayed sunset  
slicing out like the Japanese war flag

fifty years ago and Nagasaki. The chant  
continues us. Now the great  
work begins we thought of leaving

and what I make for you is merry (holy)  
and awkward morrice-dancers klutz their shoon  
and cobbled stones and collops all

trying to dance the pig to death  
they'll roast come Lammas. The great  
work is full of islands. Gay fodder,

feigned (ficta) history (gesta) deeds  
of the lowmen and their molls, a weather  
(seas 10-15 feet tonight, winds at 20 knots)

that is beauty and leaves us simply here.

7 August 1995

The great work is beginning  
the great work is done  
she dances in the sky  
and down here on the fence  
that keeps deer off the lilies  
(day lilies) and oregano  
is perched a little what is it,  
grey mousy with a bright  
broad yellow tum, a warbler  
or a whatsit, the book won't help,  
the bird is gone before it speaks.  
It seems unfair  
to have a woman  
dancing in the air  
and a bird down here.  
But the bird is gone.

The book is closed, the great  
work is beginning  
(not about winning).  
Game is the opposite of play.  
Like like and love when in love.  
Opportunities breed down here,  
blue bonnet, planet of war.

Sometimes all night you hear the channel bell  
or I've been listening to a scream you hear in dream  
when the sea opens and the cloud comes down.  
A charnel bell and no one listening.  
Sometimes we die in the night and are reborn  
no wiser but a little cleaner. Scoured sky  
of ocean sunshine early. On this island  
you can wake before the wind. "The great  
work is beginning," you think, the muslin  
curtain billows in her window, a bird  
you've never seen sits on the fence and doesn't



say a word. Yellow throat and thorax,  
soft taupe or mouse-grey feathers, an eye  
on you. It means me. Opportunity.  
The work that men were milk to manage,

anybody can. Innocents in bed, sparrows  
bathing. In comes the sea for not the first time.  
Cloudless, *bleu souriant*, islands playing tic tac toe  
and the sea always winning. Mute archipelago!  
Spider on my back, sunburn, heal!  
(The great work is beginning.)

#### Interviews

with alchemists: say, beldame,  
why your son left you to stir his porridge.  
—Have no son and I am young.  
These are the groats of gold,  
this fire is *negotiation*,  
the spoon seems made of horn to you  
because light squeezes through it  
but it's a metal of another kind  
from a planet where no one's crucified,  
not near this galaxy.  
If you listen I'll let you taste.

And you sir with the pitchfork in your hand  
turning wet salty-looking hay along the shore  
tossing hanks of it high in the wet breeze  
like a devil winnowing sinners, who  
are you supposed to be?

—I am the heart  
of conversation, I speculate and gossip,  
this matter that I agitate is *humid fire*,  
blaze without the inconveniences of flame.  
But all the qualities of heat you'd need  
will come to you from this salt grass,  
plus feed your sheep. I have to turn it  
every hour to catch the fresh breath of the sea,  
that superior furnace and eloquent alembic  
where all things are processed —deeply and widely—

and the great work begins.

These two, once spoken,  
resume their disposition of the matter trusted to their care.  
Or we have a tryst with matter, a little marriage, a long divorce.  
Love. Charity. Sans espoir, though,  
except that breed of Hope that's called Other People,  
do what you do for their sake,

and for love  
I keep the calendar,

setting down clear the name  
and properties of every day  
in case this day is the one

when love is born and grows  
and needs to know its purpose  
among the easy rocks at seaside

all our climaxes  
listening to the red and mauvish roses  
shiver in the wind.

Everything has something on its mind.  
Everything has something to report.

In the glass top of the table I see reflected  
the very eaves of the house that shields me  
and the blue intensity above, here shown below.  
Look down to see the sky.

(The great work  
is beginning.) what is the practice of the sky?  
A scramble of blue vetch beside the highway,  
a hawk, big, white patched underwing all else dark  
brune or ruin, sways hovering  
half an hour over the heart of the island.  
Unusual bird. His appearance  
enters the annals — this  
is the chemical we needed for the broth,  
sky-salt, alkaloids of danger.

(How sweet the world if men would sleep

or if they'd wake. How sad the intermede,  
this war. No bank on the island,  
the sky is made of money. No sheep but plenty wool.)

Wampum fantasies, your wealth in your lap,  
in colors and most palpable. Dream again  
that kindly cloud that banked the sun  
deep in the alembic of the sky — the Other Vessel —  
into each the other pours — interview  
the Maiden lighthouse keeper, the Lady of the Valve  
who merges the invisible water of the sky  
with the invisible emptiness of sea. And conversely  
coactive —like a kid in new sneakers—  
sprints cautiously on the pink rocks between  
sea-poppies, sea-roses, sea-peas and the sand.

Blue shadows in white curtains. There is a truth  
that sounds like lie when spoken,  
there is a lie in silence also  
when lovers matched only in insecurity  
play a guessing game but will not speak.  
Annotate your pleasures, white man.

Does mindless talk or mindless music  
more vex the decent demons of a place?  
The talk is livem the music is recorded—  
does that matter to the Earthlords, Landlords,  
the spirits under and other? I wonder.

Suppose there were nothing but this gossip—  
would that make it true? That, alchemists,  
is what I'm asking you. You  
with your earplux and your bellows, yellow  
metals smelly waxes red reflections,  
pale motivations, violet situations,  
you with your beast horns and white shadows,  
whiet shadows, you I'm asking with your gleet  
and gyzm, cosmoses and chrism, rhymes and slimes,

you with a word for everything  
and not a thing for me,  
you with your peacock weather and slim-hipped dictionaries.

Far out a trawler works the Vineyard Sound.  
And I'm waiting for an answer.

Sancta Euphoria ora pro nobis,  
for we are sad with comeliness in a comely world.  
And stepping up through bayberry  
bushes and tall grasses  
we reached the southern headland and  
I sneezed on that cliff. The gulls  
black and white wheeled screaming up  
from their lodges on the crumbling edge,  
shouted to heaven at a sound they never heard—  
o human sneezes maybe now and then  
but never mine before or one like mine,  
I sneeze like Cyrano from a nose like Nile,

old hawk weary of the sun.

The new old old Revolution.  
The permanent king  
and his annual appointment  
with the guillotine.  
A dialogue of Christians  
with the Chief of the Do-III Isles  
summoned by Judge C to attend  
—in silk and periwig—  
the everlasting assizes of the skies.

Survive.  
That's all,  
survive.

8 August 1995

The great work begins, the ant  
is in the kitchen, the sun's magnesium

breaks on the Cape flare, the old nylon flag  
twitches in the cloudless wind,  
haze over mainland, am I wrong,

are you dreaming? The hymn from the chapel  
on Sunday night lingers in the rocks  
through Wednesday, can't catch the words,  
music the same tune as the wind,

the meritorious sequencers of heaven  
lift the Superior Man's whiskers  
in a light dawn breeze. The decisions  
are all made. God is pure description.  
Sophocles washes the ink off his fingers,  
goes back to bed for forty winks, knots, needs  
uncoil in us, let it be so,  
the knots that are needs  
are tight in us  
the great work lets us untie. Die  
is no answer to day.  
These faux-amis, these sound-alikes!

To circumcise the globe! Hypothecate some notorious Idea  
and then pay interest on it ever after with your thinking  
with your wishing with your sex. And where will we rent  
our wisdom when, and pawn our meek experiences then?  
The great work is dull as a clam this morning,  
the whales white and otherwise have sailed away  
and the lights of New Bedford wink out in daylight,  
delight, we are rescued by the commonplace, we thrive,  
watch out, I have warned you before of these trivial resemblances.

The elegant alternatives that men are  
to a better love. Sound effects  
of rain falling on the moon.

All likeness is seduction.  
The fairy at the cradle launches  
the child with an unpronounceable name  
to keep it safe ever after,

no one in the house of nowhere, sleeping.

A man caught in his name like a flag caught in the wind,  
we are danced. It looks like rhyme  
when poetry is signed  
between the mute and the surd,  
we are danced. The Bureau  
of False Measurements  
sends its inspectors everywhere,  
you meet them on the stairs,  
your feet don't fit, the door  
dissolves, a wall wavers.  
We put our trust in the shimmeriest.

Clock time an hour after lesion. Right ascension  
perplex the house of your room. Each  
born into a licit but limited cosmos, each  
is meant to stretch the membrane out until  
the shimmer solids and the wake sleeps up—  
then, children, we are crusaders of the fact.  
Till then consumers in a dream of politics.

If only I could make you dream. Last night  
three rabbits by the schoolhouse lawn  
prudently white-tailed it off. Off  
is where fear takes me. Horizon hot,  
wind cool. People from the yachts walk  
up and down the hill in search of pleasure,  
to be seen in prospect from the highest place.  
I will not join the union. (Learn to swim,  
study fox trot — and then she had a child,  
she who had been all that dancing  
—litmus paper doesn't alter what it measures—  
a song reacts to its occasion. Time never comes back.  
I will not sing. Be thankful for all blessing,  
the great work is beginning. Long Division,  
presidents of the United States, class patron saint  
— enough if schools would teach the names alone,  
the names, and let the things come later,  
plant a mute name and let it be a magnet in them

that draws ever after (*dorénavant*, the golden future)  
a world to kiss its mirror. The referent  
comes rushing through summer meadows to meet its label.

Theory of education.  
Plant shadows in the garden  
from which the sun will rise.  
Teach dreams so daylight comes.  
Don't give contrived experience,  
give authentic names.  
The mysteries. Say words  
and don't explain. Let the word  
be born in them and be flesh.  
Don't tell too much  
lest they weary of all story.  
Or delight too much in hearing  
and be dull. Say a hard word  
out loud and put thereby  
an itch in their ears. A word  
is waiting to happen.

Mythology is nothing but this.  
Over the altar  
they show an image of a ship,  
a schooner with four sails,  
you can see the dark hull  
wallow in the sea.  
Mosaic ship and sky and sea,  
we suppose they worship that  
as a sign of sheer going.  
Pure vection. From this isle  
by night set out and reach  
some further shore  
or sail forever in the raw  
heaven of what happens.  
Who knows what people want when they pray?

Just ask us,  
the ghosts are saying.

Just ask us,  
give us the money  
to make an exception,  
to be beautiful  
in the Lord's sight  
or the Lady's,  
to be a ship and high  
wallowing,  
to be double and a thing,  
to be everything,

to be a picture of a ship  
cut from clam shell and mussel shells,  
to be blue and fair weather,  
to be forever,

to be wampum in your lap  
or hand to hand set free  
by changing hands,

the shipmaker god  
and the wind who tears  
your father's sails.

9 August 1995

The great work begins with yesterday  
and dies into morning. Dry dock of a man  
trying to mean it. Who is my shoe?  
Where did I wander?

The prayers I told the moon last night  
were colorful and full of balsam,  
reminded me of being born,  
kept us warm on 'Lookout Hill'

where the Welsh first saw America.  
ApMeirica. The blue lagoon of fantasy  
where crabs bite toes. Gulls are unusual,  
being actual. And if you want to know



or know where oceans go and what things  
there are in Manhome, just ask the gulls.  
But Womanhouse knows something more,  
only so much a mother can give her child,

then the poor strange chromosome is on his own,  
basking a while in mother-light then  
the boreal circumstance of history  
shivers him and he is me. No better and no worse.

The great work is beginning, a lament  
of gender, loss, gender is loss,  
cities sacked and oceans smirked with oil,  
rain forest with copper tailings,

this jewel unbezeled and befouled,  
just like everybody else. I called myself Arkel  
(what happened yesterday? Proust never reports  
his weeks of small talk with the cadets at Doncières,  
just the fact of conversation, the soothing framework  
of memorable jabberstance.) What happened  
between the ribs of the ruined barges, sea-smoothed  
the beams or jagg'd with sun, tree-big girders  
with foot-long spikes rusted by salt-light, I saw the sun  
spin on the axle of heaven, I saw the Mother  
of Meaning clearly, I saw her hands in mudra balanced,  
this silence is my meaning, I saw her children  
kalpa after kalpa reeling from the harmless light  
they teach to heal us. What happened over Egypt?  
What happened in the little bull's-eye (a boat)  
over Church's beach, or by the frog pond,  
cool wind and no one dead? How does what  
takes all our time not turn into history? Or who?  
A spavined sentence is the one we speak,  
soon forgotten, but not the mood of it,  
the cloth he wore to say such things  
and the moon tattoo'd on Doreen's breast,  
a slip of it inside the disk of sun like Osiris  
hidden in his wife, we hide in one another,  
no body is my meaning, as if all light is found in me

and rose from pain, I suffered for this sake.  
All islands talk about such tender things as these.

Ask the gulls. Bach quotes Vivaldi.  
A long time the story's been around,  
it's been with us since before there was a moon.  
You know what's different? People  
don't whistle anymore. All  
our music is a drumbeat angry,  
or the tune vanishes from anxious lips.  
A whistle was a kind of kiss that speaks.  
Whose fault now is this missing hiss?

The moon, I'd say, who lost some brightness,  
and the fulminating sun —the world grows weary—  
rich Democrats, and gay Republicans  
and anarchist yachtsmen sailing ever further—  
we live out the karma of Nagasaki,  
Hiroshima, Dresden, My Lai, Tokyo  
and inherit the iniquity of whatever we destroy  
—no sane man eats a tiger—  
and we eat Nagasaki. Inescapable.  
There is only the world  
and no place for the consequences  
of my acts to go but here.  
They stay and stay and are me.

We have to turn away from things to see them,  
and from the corner of your eye catch the cause of all,  
the clothes she wore to show such things  
as danced —tone imbricated on tone and sound  
on body moving anvil'd— with the rhythm of her talk,  
language *is* our nature, noblest shadow of the mind.

Logs piled up to hold the hill in place.  
(What was that mouse-and-yellow bird? And the vulture  
—is it?— sailing over our property just one more shade?)  
(And nobody whistles on the island,  
not like the Canaries where they talk  
from mountainside to mountainside with shrill entendres,

a meaning tumbling down an echo, a shadow on the hill)  
some lies I heard in passing through the world.

Or Malory in jail, beside us, whispering.  
This work offers you the flesh or timely pleasure  
of a sustained conversation loopholed to make room  
for your least remembrance or greatest thought—  
come talk with me, this great work  
is a walk along the clifftops  
through bushes charged with blackberries,  
near gull nests and a steady wind.  
No land that way for three thousand miles  
so plenty of time for us to say  
all we have to say to one another  
and all the silences we pass from hand to hand.  
I have invented a conversation that never stops  
and every line of it makes room for you.

Touch me or despise me or prize  
the antic amble of my dog mind,  
but come talk with me forever by the sea.

Forever. Come talk with me. (I have energized  
your silences with song  
but fear you would not talk.)  
Come talk with me.  
(A silence  
is a line of poetry  
better than the one you just read  
but not so wonderful as  
what rises in your heart to answer  
in the space of time provided

between the opening and closing of the door.  
Then the poem has another line to say.  
The greatest poems ask the greatest answers in you.)  
Come walk with me, the poem said—  
and I am the first victim of its charm  
forever answering.

The great work is beginning  
(we spoil things with our music)

a ship of clam shells  
cut to tesseræ,  
their inner sides  
a breath of color.

I was wrong. Seen at noon, half-far on calm sea,  
an ordinary schooner does look just like this,  
as if its keelless hull floated on, not in, the water.  
It has to do with shadow and reflection.  
It has to do with light.

The church with clam shells on its altar  
in the sign of a ship — turning evidence of death  
into some powerful if unlikely journeying  
—a ship, for Christ's sake, where  
could we go on a *ship*?—

over the narrow channel to another world.  
Sea-bite and faery lore, the folded far dark pink  
of sea roses and a few almost gaunt  
sea-poppies, their lemony springtime darkened towards  
ocher. We all come home.

Can any island be an ever?  
O sky my looking glass  
and earthly telescope  
I see this rock  
that bears my feet  
or bruises me  
indifferently,

under the lighthouse at Gosnold Pond  
watching the keen Atlantic,  
mother of oceans.

Sea-rift  
and beach poppies, from the crack

in the base of the world  
all substance continues to arise,  
earth-gift and martyr-flow,  
giver and giving lost in the seamist  
before the sun burns off these measures,

but the gift is here.  
We rise in our portions,  
lovely as wet grass.  
Dewfall  
and renaissance surprises,  
who is my body?  
The knights set out to find it,  
what else could a man be looking for,

a crow showed them the way,  
a crow is always a beginning,  
pharmacist in the sky, blood manners,  
the look of sunlight through your fingers,

who is my body, will you tell me  
or you? Why do I have to tie your hands  
with a satin sash yards long  
to make me an answer?

Why didn't I understand the pain you choose  
drives out the pain you fear?  
I knew the words but the crows know the tune,  
the knights set out to parley with the wind,

where is my body? His work is all beginning,  
red sash for her sake worn snug  
around his pectorals beneath the steel,  
in his stupid iron helmet gilded

the crows he heard reverberated  
croak by claw by call  
until he thought their voices  
were his own, his brain was breathing,

his eyes were calling, sun sweat  
dipped down his nose, he will find  
no body but his own, if that,  
the horse is eager, a hammer-hilted sword

hangs powerless to decide. But the crow  
knows, and if I listen tells  
where knights are going and who find they there  
and what they do together, clipping and kissing

till a stone would grow weary of their fire  
and break, and let stream out  
the necessary radiance at the heart of things.  
They will be silenced by what they see.

She will haul in a long scarlet sash  
slippery as a thought and they will tie them together.  
A new kind of bird they'll be and the crow  
has seen it all before. The great

work is waiting to begin. The great  
work is waiting. The great work is beginning.

All week we've seen a hawk above the cliffs  
where gulls and terns and cormorants are usual.  
The great work is a sleeping man and a woman's,  
the great work is in your hand. All week a hawk  
over the upland moors, shadow wheeling over bayberry  
thickets, all week a work is waiting,  
of course a poem's work begins where the words end,  
begins in you, survivor of so many texts,  
it all, it all, is listening.

Only an elite wants to protect the poor. Absent grace,  
absent kindness, an electorate will kill.  
It is sober to recall the Orient Light  
our Jefferson supposed would bathe a people  
brought to the valvework, the deeds of opening.

Don't be so serious. We'll all die soon

and every death of course is premature. Till then  
the great work is all we have, the stone  
he breaks into music, the gulps of water  
something still half asleep will quaff  
standing barefoot at the kitchen sink,  
the final priest of morning.

Music breaks word. Word breaks silence. Silence breaks music.  
We are owned. The Turkish cymbal-makers in their polishing  
have clashed the sun again over Martha's Vineyard and shade came back,  
the only thing we need sun for, long dance and shivaree of shadows,  
the contradictions. In bed we find each other but where am I?  
Why did I disappear from your dream, wandered off  
down New Bedford's cobbled streets to find the sailmaker's loft  
and have our torn sail sewn. And you wondered where I was,  
and missed me, and woke, and there I was beside you  
but that's not the same. Someone who goes in dream is gone.  
In sleep though I will come back to you again. That's why the knights  
go pricking through the forests of the world in search  
of what they carry with them. There is no territory to discover  
but my body, no river but the ever-fluent feel of things  
that runs my life. Crows see this, and there are no crows on the island.